Reconsidering the Roman conquest

Reconsidering the Roman conquest: New archaeological perspectives[1]

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This issue of the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* includes a thematic section with five papers on *New advances in the archaeology of the Roman conquest*. The publication emanated from a session of the same name organised by the authors at the *Roman Archaeology Conference* 2018 in Edinburgh. As editors of this special issue, we intend that the present article serves as a short introduction to the topic.[2]

Limes archaeology versus the archaeology of conquest

The Roman Empire, like most empires in the ancient world, was the product of aggressive military expansion. This process of expansion is documented in the written sources,[3] but the quantity and quality of these sources are highly variable and reflect a one-sided Roman perspective. The Roman military has always been a popular field of research, but most of this research has focused on '*limes* archaeology', which differs from the archaeology of the Roman conquest in terms of research questions, methodologies and also theoretical perspectives. While the latter studies the material remains of offensive military campaigns that lasted only a few years, *limes* archaeology investigates the military infrastructure in the frontier provinces during the long period of the '*Pax Romana'*. According to the dominant paradigm of *limes* archaeology, the Roman army usually acted as the defender of peace and civil life in the provinces against external 'barbarian' enemies. By contrast, in the expansive wars of the Late Republic and Early Empire, we see the Roman army in the role of brutal aggressor, associated with violence, mass enslavement and sometimes even genocide.[4]

Compared to the substantial energy invested in *limes* archaeology, the conquests of the Roman Empire – characterised by relatively short offensive campaigns against external enemies – have received remarkably little attention in archaeology. Several factors play a role here. It is difficult to get a tangible hold on the remains of mobile armies and battlefields. Marching camps used for just a few days leave few traces and produce scarce find material. The same is true of the immense damage and demographic losses inflicted by armies that ravaged the countryside using scorched-earth strategies. Burning farmsteads, stealing cattle, destroying harvests, and enslaving, raping or killing people are all practices that leave little or no traces in the

[1] This paper and the thematic section have been produced with the support of the Philip Leverhulme Prize.
[2] We wish to thank all the participants of the Edinburgh session for their papers and their contribution to the discussions.
[3] C.R.Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire. A social and economic study* (Baltimore/London 1997); G. Moosbauer and R. Wiegels (eds), *Fines imperii – imperium sine fine? Römische Okkupations- und Grenzpolitik im frühen Principat* (Rahden 2011).
[4] Cf. N. Roymans and M. Fernández-Götz, "Caesar in Gaul: New Perspectives on the Archaeology of Mass Violence", in T. Brindle et al. (eds), *TRAC 2014: Proceedings of the Twenty-Fourth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference* (Oxford 2015) 70-80. From the perspective of ancient history, see N. Barrandon, *Les massacres de la République Romaine* (Paris 2018).

archaeological record. An additional problem is the limited chronological resolution of the sparse material data, which hampers the making of connections with historically documented military campaigns. It is no surprise that scholars complained barely two decades ago that Caesar's actions in Northern Gaul and Augustus' Cantabrian Wars in Northern Spain were almost completely untraceable in the archaeological record.[5]

However, the situation outlined above should not lead us to conclude that conquests had limited societal impact because there is scarce archaeological evidence of such impact. 'Absence of evidence' is not the same as 'evidence of absence'. Three developments have sparked a breakthrough in the past two decades: 1) the increased quantity and quality of archaeological data in many regions; 2) the rapid evolution of conflict archaeology and its methodologies;[6] and 3) the impact of the post-colonial research agenda, which has generated greater interest in the negative consequences of Roman militarism and imperialist expansion for the conquered societies.[7]

Archaeology can contribute to the study of Roman military expansion by investigating the geographical dimension and the direct social impact of the conquest on the affected societies in the frontier. In this paper, we will pay special attention to the issues of mass violence, genocide and demography, employing an integrated historical-archaeological approach. We will explore four themes, making connections with the case studies on the archaeology of the Roman conquest presented in this issue. The focus will be on the 'barbarian' frontiers of the Roman North and West in the last two centuries BC and the first two centuries AD.

Army camps, battle sites, and the geography and strategy of Roman military campaigns

The starting point for archaeological research is the localisation and identification of Roman military camps, of fortifications besieged by the Roman army, and of Roman marching routes. This type of research is not new. Similar aims were already articulated by Napoleon III in the mid-19th century, the difference being that we now have a set of advanced methods at our disposal. Essential tools are the systematic use of air photographs and LiDAR-based data, in combination with small-scale control excavations and metal detecting surveys. Of key importance is also the typo-chronological study of Roman *militaria* and coinage.

In the past two decades, archaeology has been successful at tracing temporary Roman army camps, characterised by their more or less rectangular layout, double ditches and *clavicula*-shaped gates. The study of Caesar's campaigns in Northern Gaul and the adjacent Germanic frontier was stimulated by the discovery of a military camp at Hermeskeil in the Trier region and of two camps in Limburg on the east bank of the Rhine;[8] the latter represent the first

[5] See the papers by Roymans and Peralta *et al*. in this issue.
[6] M. Fernández-Götz and N. Roymans (eds), *Conflict Archaeology: Materialities of Collective Violence from Prehistory to Late Antiquity* (New York 2018); H. Meller and M. Schefzik (eds) *Krieg: Eine archäologische Spurensuche* (Darmstadt 2015); D. Scott, L. Babits and C. Haecker (eds) *Fields of Conflict: Battlefield Archaeology from the Roman Empire to the Korean War* (Washington 2009).
[7] A. Gardner, "Thinking about Roman Imperialism: Postcolonialism, Globalisation and Beyond?". *Britannia* 44 (2013) 1-25; J. Webster and N. Cooper (eds) *Roman Imperialism: Post-colonial Perspectives* (Leicester 1996).
[8] S. Hornung, "Tracing Julius Caesar. The Late Republican military camp at Hermeskeil and its historical context", in M. Fernández-Götz and N. Roymans (supra n5) 193-203.

archaeological proof of Caesar's Rhine crossings. Recent research in Britain has identified the probable landing place of the Caesarean army for his expeditions in *Britannia*.[9] Remains of two Roman camps were discovered recently near Orange, which can probably be linked to the battle of *Arausio* (105 BC) against the *Cimbri* and *Teutones*.[10] Perhaps the most spectacular progress has been made in the mountains of Northern Spain, where over 60 military camps have been identified, most of them probably used only temporarily in relation to the period of the Cantabrian Wars (29-19 BC).[11]

Another line of research is the identification of ancient battlefields. Two categories of sites can be distinguished. Firstly, we have indigenous hillforts or *oppida* that were besieged by the Roman army. Prominent examples are Monte Bernorio in Northern Spain,[12] *Alesia* in Central Gaul,[13] and the Burnswark hillfort in Scotland.[14] In all these cases, contemporary Roman army camps have been discovered in the immediate vicinity. Secondly, there are battle sites in the open field. The best examples are the sites of Kalkriese and Harzhorn, both situated in the Germanic frontier zone east of the Rhine.[15]

The type of research sketched above enables archaeologists to develop a more accurate picture of the geography of Roman military campaigns and of the process of conquest. It may also enable us to better contextualise the available textual evidence. A concrete example is the recent discovery of Roman camps and battle sites in Northern Spain, which has allowed Peralta *et al.* (this issue) to present a first reconstruction of the Roman army's strategy in the Cantabrian Wars of Octavian Augustus, including the phasing, logistics and construction of a road network. Similarly, the work carried out by Reid and Nicholson (this issue) at the Burnswark hillfort allows the hypothetical reconstruction of a major Roman military operation – unmentioned in the written sources – in 2nd-century AD Scotland. Alternatively, the Burnswark site has also been explained as a training ground for the Roman army.[16] This debate is interesting from a methodological point of view: how should we distinguish in conflict archaeology between a military practice site and the site of an actual siege?

A general problem in the above type of research is the limited chronological resolution of the archaeological material in combination with the scarce dating evidence for temporary used Roman military sites. Although considerable progress has been made in this field, further

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[9] A. Fitzpatrick, "Ebbsfleet, 54 BC. Searching for the launch site of Caesar's British invasions". *Current Archaeology* 337 (2018) 26-32.
[10] A. Deyber and Th. Luginbühl, "*Cimbri* and *Teutones* against Rome. First results concerning the battle of *Arausio* (105 BC)," in M. Fernández-Götz and N. Roymans (supra n5) 155-166.
[11] J. Camino, E. Peralta and J. F. Torres-Martínez (eds) *Las Guerras Astur-Cántabras* (Gijón 2015); Peralta *et al*., this issue. See also A. Morillo, "The Roman occupation in the north of Hispania. War, military deployment and cultural integration", in G. Moosbauer and R. Wiegels (supra n.2).
[12] C. J. Brown, J. F. Torres-Martínez, M. Fernández-Götz and A. Martínez-Velasco, "Fought under the walls of *Bergida*: KOCOA analysis of the Roman attack on the Cantabrian *oppidum* of Monte Bernorio (Spain)". *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 12 (2017) 115-138.
[13] M. Reddé, "The Battlefield of *Alesia*", in M. Fernández-Götz and N. Roymans (supra n5) 183-191.
[14] Reid and Nicholson, this issue.
[15] M. Meyer, "The Germanic-Roman Battlefields of Kalkriese and Harzhorn. A Methodological Comparison", in M. Fernández-Götz and N. Roymans (supra n5) 205-217.
[16] E.g., D.J. Breeze, "Burnswark: Roman Siege or Army Training Ground?" *Archeological Journal* 168 (2011) 166-80.

refinement of the chronological framework remains a priority for the future. Be that as it may, identifications of archaeological sites with historically documented camps or battlefields should always be considered as probability statements. Critical here is not absolute proof but rather the degree of probability based on a combination of archaeological, historical and historical-geographical data. An illustrative example is the battlefield site of Kalkriese. Although it is widely accepted that we are dealing here with the historic site of the Varus battle of AD 9, an alternative link to one of the campaigns of revenge undertaken by Germanicus between AD 10-16 cannot be completely ruled out.[17]

The demographic impact of conquest

The written sources show that military campaigns could have dramatic negative effects on the demography of conquered regions. The causes were often diverse; we should think not only of the casualties of direct military combat, but also of the massacres of non-combatant groups, of systematic scorched-earth campaigns by invading armies, of the deportation and mass enslavement of groups, and of fugitives moving to neighbouring regions. Mass violence appears to have been a systematic feature of Roman military expansion, and Roman society in general was familiar with the use of collective violence.[18] The Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, for example, shows extremely violent scenes of the mass execution of Germanic prisoners, the burning down of villages and the massacring and enslavement of non-combatant groups.

Historical sources suggest that there were large regional differences in the direct demographic impact of wars of conquest. In some regions the population seems to have remained rather stable, while in others the conquest was extremely violent, escalating to a level that would justify the label of genocide.[19] Caesar's narrative is of special interest, as we are dealing here with an account by the leading general. His narrative suggests that the conquest was extremely violent and had dramatic consequences for tribal societies in Gaul, and in particular in the northern Germanic frontier zone, where several regions must have been largely depopulated and transformed into landscapes of trauma and terror. Although the extent to which his account was distorted by exaggerations and imperialist rhetoric remains contested,[20] the impact of his campaigns must have been enormous for indigenous populations. Appian (*Gallic History* 2), for example, claimed that Caesar killed one million Gauls and enslaved another million out of a total of four million opponents. These figures might be exaggerations, but even

[17] Cf. the discussion in P. Kehne, "Germanicus und die Germanienfeldzüge 10 bis 16 n. Chr.", in *Triumpf ohne Sieg. Roms Ende in Germanien* (Haltern Am See 2017) 93-100; R. Wolters, *Die Schlacht im Teutoburgerwald* (rev. edn. München 2017) 220 ff.

[18] J. Bellemore, "The Roman concept of massacre. Julius Caesar in Gaul", in P.G. Dwyer and L. Ryan (eds), *Theatres of violence. Massacre, mass killing and atrocity throughout history* (Oxford/New York 2012) 38-49. For a tabular overview of Roman massacres and cases of mass violence in the last two centuries of the Roman Republic, see N. Barrandon, *Les massacres de la République Romaine* (Paris 2018) 241-246.

[19] Genocide is defined here as a practice of mass murder of a national, ethnic or religious group in combination with the intent (successful or otherwise) to annihilate that group. Cf. D. Bloxham and A. D. Moses (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford 2010).

[20] See discussions in C. S. Kraus, "*Bellum Gallicum*", in M. Griffin (ed.), *A Companion to Julius Caesar* (Oxford 2009) 159-174; A. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome. War in words* (Austin 2006).

if we accept only half or a third of the numbers, the demographic impact would have been dramatic, comparable to the disasters of the Thirty Year's War.

Can archaeology provide an independent check of historically documented cases of mass violence? It is almost impossible to identify short-term depopulation lasting just one or two years, but a depopulation extending over a longer period of time may be archeologically detectable. What we need are test regions with strong archaeological datasets where we can investigate any habitation discontinuities. Roymans' paper (this issue) attempts to analyse for several test regions whether the conquest phase corresponded to a phase of demographic regression. His research is based on the evidence from excavated and published settlements, using a combination of chronological parameters: the typo-chronology of house plans, personal ornaments, coins and pottery. All regions produced indications of a substantial discontinuity in settlements lasting several decades. Complete depopulation is not demonstrable anywhere, and – given historical analogies from premodern times – is not to be expected. Data about premodern systematic destruction of rural areas by armies teach us that demographic losses of up to 70% could occur.[21] Another conclusion is that most casualties originated from starvation and illnesses rather than from direct military combat. This kind of demographic research is important because it informs us in a novel way about the short-term social consequences of conquest.

Migration and ethnic dynamics in frontiers

Roman military expansion often led not only to a demographic regression but also to a substantial ethnic dynamic in the conquered regions. There is written evidence of disappearing tribes and of the formation of new tribes through processes of migration, fusion and fission, often in the context of a re-ordering of power relations in the frontier by the Roman authorities.[22] This issue is historically well documented in the Lower Germanic frontier, where we observe a rearrangement of the ethnic map in the decades after the Caesarian conquest. Human mobility played a key role here. Immigrant tribal groups, such as the Batavians, Cananefates, Ubii and Cugerni, settled down in heavily depopulated regions on the Gallic side of the Rhine.[23]

Archaeologists can contribute to the study of migration and ethnic dynamics in Roman frontiers by testing current models that are based on the written sources. A pilot project has just been launched in the Batavian river delta.[24] The starting point in the research strategy are well-excavated and published rural settlements that were founded or re-occupied in the early post-conquest period, where we can study the material remains of first-generation settlers. Although it is very difficult for archaeologists to identify the tribal ethnicity of individuals or households,

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[21] L. Adriaenssen, *Staatsvormend geweld. Overleven aan de frontlinies in de meierij van Den Bosch, 1572-1629* (Tilburg 2007).
[22] C.R. Whittaker (supra n.2).
[23] N. Roymans, *Ethnic identity and imperial power. The Batavians in the Early Roman Empire* (Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 10, Amsterdam 2004).
[24] The project *Tiel-Medel as a key site for innovative research towards migration and ethnogenesis in the Roman frontier,* started in 2018 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and is led by Stijn Heeren, Nico Roymans and Henk van de Velde, and funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.

the material data offers us an opportunity to trace the geographic origin of new settlers by employing a combination of methods: conventional material culture studies of handmade pottery, personal ornaments, coinage and house architecture, as well as strontium isotope studies of both human and animal remains. The initial results are promising; they seem to confirm the historical picture of a substantial influx of immigrant groups from the east bank of the Rhine, but the origins of the new settlers are more heterogeneous than the historical model predicts. This suggests that processes of ethnogenesis in the post-Caesarian Germanic frontier were more complex, involving a fusion of segmented groups of different origin under the direct or indirect supervision of Rome.

Conquest and ethnic stereotyping of the barbarian 'Other'

The Roman Empire had an ethnic map of the peoples inhabiting its frontiers.[25] The ethnic labels were linked to sets of stereotypical characterisations in which Rome defined the 'Other' in a more or less contrastive scheme with its own key values and norms. A well-known discourse is that of the 'barbarian Other', which was applied to peoples in the Celtic, Germanic and Iberian frontiers. This ethnic stereotyping of external groups may have been a relevant ideological factor in Rome's wars of conquest. It may have strengthened the fighting spirit and engagement of Roman troops and helped to legitimise conquest and the use of extreme violence, even genocide, against resistant opponents.

It is important to observe that the Roman stereotypical images of the barbarian Other did not form a homogeneous whole; they differed significantly between groups and were also subject to change. Interesting in this regard is Caesar's ethnography of Gauls and Germans. The Gauls are described in relatively positive terms as a people well suited for inclusion in the Roman Empire. In contrast, the Germans are described in extremely negative terms, as an inferior, semi-nomadic race of warlike bandits that posed a serious threat to the Roman provinces, and even to Italy. In Caesar's eyes, Germans were clearly unsuitable candidates for incorporation into the Empire.[26]

Archaeologists can contribute to this debate by investigating whether such differences in ethnic framing of frontier peoples had any impact on the use of mass violence by the Roman army in the wars of conquest. Roymans (this issue) argues that the regions in Northern Gaul that suffered most from demographic losses in the conquest period more or less overlap with those regions that, according to Caesar, were inhabited by Germanic groups. It is probably no coincidence that four of the five cases of genocide described by Caesar occurred in the northern Germanic frontier zone of Gaul.

Concluding remarks

Cornwell's paper focuses on the 'rhetorics of empire' by investigating how Rome explained and justified its military actions in the frontier zones. Her contribution is important for the broader historical contextualisation of the 'explosion' of new archaeological data on

[25] G. Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Chichester/Malden 2011). See also B. Isaac, *The invention of racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton 2004).
[26] Roymans, this issue.

Rome's military conquests. All together, the six papers in this thematic session demonstrate that archaeology can contribute to a more holistic understanding of Roman military expansion by constructing new narratives of conquest that focus not only on the strategies and practices of Roman offensive warfare, but also on the impact of military expansion on indigenous societies at a local and regional level. This can give us a better, more balanced picture of Roman imperialism and the complex dynamics at the frontiers.